

Divine and human in Euripides' *Medea*

Edith Hall

Euripides' *Medea* is one of the most enduringly shocking Greek tragedies to survive, presenting the almost unimaginable crime of infanticide, carried out by Medea in an attempt to punish her husband, Jason, for his infidelity. The *Medea* is often invoked in discussions of the representation of women in tragedy, but here Edith Hall focuses on a different aspect of the play – religion. She argues that, although the *Medea* appears to play out the universal rules of the gods concerning just punishment, as well as offering a mythological explanation for some local cults, the ultimate act of infanticide takes this play beyond any rational explanation, either divine or human.

Fleeing the country: Medea's superhuman exit

At the climax of Euripides' *Medea*, shortly after the voices of the two young boys have been heard screaming for help from backstage, Jason arrives at his former residence in Corinth and demands that the doors be opened. Like Jason and the chorus, we have every reason to believe Medea is inside, with the slaughtered children. As he bangs at the doors, physically trying to force them open, our eyes are concentrated on the level of the doors represented by the staging. We expect it to open and reveal the scene of carnage inside. Yet nothing happens on this level of vision: instead, the stage crane swings into view above the house, with Medea and the two little corpses visible inside. In Greek tragedy, ordinary mortals do not pass from the interior of houses to the sky without our noticing it, nor travel by the supernatural means represented by the *machina*: we now know that Medea is superhuman.

Medea flies off, as the vindictive Aphrodite disappears from the stage in *Hippolytus* and Dionysus disappears at the end of *Bacchae*. Her crime, like a god's action against a mortal, will remain unpunished, and she gloats over her possession of the precious corpses. The chorus are stunned and conclude the play like this (1415):

*Zeus on Olympus dispenses many things.
Gods often contradict our fondest expectations.*

What we anticipate does not come to pass.

What we don't expect some god finds a way to make happen.

They are confused about the religious meaning of what has happened. Can the gods really have intended the terrible deaths that have just occurred? Indeed, all the characters in the play, except for Medea, are left either dead or bewildered by the way that events have turned out, even though they all subscribe to the same fundamental belief in the gods of Olympian religion.

Playing by the rules of the gods?

The most prominent god in the play is the supreme ruler of gods and men, Olympian Zeus himself. Zeus' main responsibility was to make sure that the basic rules of social decency were upheld, and in this capacity he was worshipped in a similar way all over the Greek world, by both men and women. His assistants in this awesome task were his one-time consort or daughter *Themis* (whose name means 'The Right [way of doing things]' or 'Natural Law'), and his daughter *Dike* ('Justice'). These 'rules' regulated human relationships at every level. They forbade incest, kin-killing, harming suppliants, hosts, or guests, failure to bury the dead, and perjury. Traditionally-minded Greeks believed that if they committed any of these crimes, then Zeus might blast them with a thunderbolt or punish them another way, often with the assistance of Themis

or Dike. At the beginning of *Medea* the theological situation as understood by the nurse, the chorus, and Medea is remarkably simple: Jason has broken his marriage vows, the promises he swore to Medea, and has made himself vulnerable to the 'Justice of Zeus'. There was even a special title for Zeus as superintendent of oaths, and that was Zeus *Horkios*. The key divinity in the traditional religion of *Medea* is Zeus *Horkios*, along with his designated partner in oath-protection, Themis, and the elemental gods Earth and Sun, by whom oaths were conventionally sworn.

The Nurse says (168–70) that Medea is calling on

*Themis, who hears our prayers, and Zeus,
who guards the promises men swear.*

The chorus intuitively feel that a woman whose husband has broken his oaths will be protected by Zeus (158–9), and say that Medea calls on Themis (208–10):

*Daughter of Zeus, goddess of the oaths
which carried her across the ocean
to Hellas, through the dark briny sea.*

Indeed, when Medea gloats at Jason from the safety of her chariot, she reaffirms that 'father Zeus' knows what has really passed between them (1352–3), and asks (1391–2) what god would listen to

*a man who doesn't keep his promises,
a man who deceives and lies to
strangers?*

Universal tragedy: local cults

The play, then, in one sense, is a simple parable of perjury punished. Yet its religion also involves cults that were specifically associated with Corinth and its surrounding areas. Aphrodite was the most important god at Corinth as well as Jason's patron, and the chorus of Corinthian women sing an ode to her (627–41). At the end of the play Medea says she is flying to the cult centre of Hera Akraia, across the Corinthian gulf at Perachora, a wealthy sanctuary. She will bury the boys and thereby found a

Corinthian ritual (1378–83), which will atone for ever for their deaths. The Doric temple of Hera Akraia was ancient and spectacularly adorned with marble tiles; everyone in Euripides' audience will have known of it. Moreover, the large number of votive objects that have been found there by archaeologists (amulets worn by pregnant women, and figurines) show that it was visited by individuals anxious about the health of babies and young children. The killing of Medea's children was therefore presented by the tragedy as the 'charter' or 'foundation' myth for a specific set of cult practices in the Corinthian area. Children who have been destroyed are here somehow to protect other children from destruction.

Hecate and Helios: Medea's partners in crime

All over the Greek world, Hera was the deity who represented women's social status as respected wives, in addition to being the angry wife of Zeus disgruntled at his infidelities. As such she shares some features with Medea in a less specifically Corinthian way. But a discussion of the religion in this play is not complete without Medea's special relationships with two gods, on the first of whom she calls when no men are in earshot (395–8):

*By Hecate, the goddess
I worship more than all the others,
the one I choose to help me in this
work,
who lives with me deep inside my
home,
these people won't bring pain into my
heart
and laugh about it...*

Euripides' portrayal of Medea was exploiting the real anxieties of Athenian men, who feared women with 'magical' expertise in lotions, potions, and spells, as is shown by the fourth-century trial of a woman named Theoris, who was executed, along with her whole family, for the use of 'drugs and incantations'.

After invoking Hecate, the goddess 'deep inside her home', Medea continues her crucial speech (401–6):

*So come, Medea,
call on all those things you know so
well,
as you plan this and set it up. Let the
work,
this deadly business, start. It's a test
of wills.
You see what you have to put up with.
You must not let Jason's marriage
make you
a laughing-stock among Corinthians,
compatriots of Sisyphus, for you
trace your family from a noble father
and from Helios, the Sun. So get to
work.*

Medea's other special relationship is with her grandfather Helios, who indeed lends her the chariot in which she can escape at the end of the play. Medea is not exactly a goddess, but neither is she vulnerable to the constraints of being human – she can physically escape what for a mortal woman would now be certain death at the hands of Jason and the Corinthians, and she can fly; what is more, there is no known ancient tradition, in any Greek or Roman author, that she ever died. 'Witch' is too weak a term for her; she sees herself as the agent of Zeus' justice, and as some sort of demigod. She never reveals exactly what goes on when she is communing with Hecate and Helios.

Beyond all human understanding

Medea therefore offers a relatively simple explanation of the role of the major gods: Jason is punished by Zeus of Oaths, through Medea, for perjury, and the events are a religious explanation for the origins of rituals at the cult of Hera Akraia. But Medea herself destabilizes this simple explanation. At first one of Euripides' apparently most accessible heroines, who speaks in ways that can seem astonishingly direct and immediate even today, she turns out to have been completely unknowable all along. She has not been playing the game of life according to the moral rules understood by humans at all. Perhaps the most important religious moment in the play occurs at the point where Medea makes up her mind to kill the children. After the scene with Aegeus, she calls out, triumphantly (764–6),

*O Zeus, and Justice, child of Zeus,
and flaming Helios – now, **my**
friends,
we'll triumph over all my enemies.*

Medea, astonishingly, counts amongst her 'friends' and allies not only Helios and Justice, but the top Olympian god, Zeus himself. The chorus hear this strange note that she strikes, and respond in what are the most telling lines, perhaps, in the whole play (811–13):

*Since you've shared your plans with
me, I urge you not to do this.
I want to help you, holding to **the**
standards of human law.*

The chorus are insisting, quite rightly, that human law does not sanction the murder of children in punishment of oath-breaking husbands. Medea, on the other hand, instantiates the philosophical principle underlying the whole play – that human reason is *not* a sufficient resource for ensuring happiness, since life is uncontrollable, disaster unavoidable, and suffering, inflicted by the gods or by other humans, indiscriminate and unfair. Most people who attend a production of *Medea*

today do not think very hard about the role of the gods, if they think about them at all. But they still feel just as powerfully the philosophical bewilderment that the play arouses.

Edith Hall teaches Classics and Drama at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her Greek Tragedy: Suffering under the Sun was published by Oxford University Press in 2010.